

“Simple solutions for our complicated world”

—Jon Acuff, New York Times Bestselling Author



GETTING IT
RIGHT
WHEN IT MATTERS
MOST

Self-Leadership
for Work & Life



Tony Gambill & Scott Carbonara

CHAPTER 1

Getting It Right

Knowledge is of no value unless you put it into practice.

—Anton Chekov

We Do Not Always Get It Right at Work

Tim was pretty excited about his upcoming performance review. Not only had he exceeded most of his key goals with flying colors, but he had also volunteered for a few corporate teams, even signing up for a big role in an important charity fundraiser.

Yeab, it's been a pretty good year, Tim reminded himself as he popped his head into his boss's empty office promptly at 9:00 a.m., as scheduled. While waiting, Tim allowed himself to ponder how much of a raise he would soon be given. *Maybe I'll even be upgraded from a cubicle to a real office—one with a door—*he smiled to himself.

After about five minutes, Tim's boss Stella arrived—apologizing that her last meeting had gone late. Tim and Stella engaged in brief small talk and pleasantries before Stella leaned back in her chair, inhaling deeply before beginning her next words.

"I've conducted eight of these quarterly review sessions already this week," Stella started, as Tim leaned forward in his chair. "But," she continued, "Yours is by far the most difficult one I have on my plate."

Tim's body suddenly felt heavy as he sank in his seat. Shocked, he caught only snippets of phrases like "incomplete tasks," "too much time on non-essential projects instead of doing your primary work," and even "chronic lateness." He felt his blood pressure rising. His face turned red, as his palms got sweaty. He was trying to listen, but his body was reacting even before his words.

Tim might not have known it at the time, but he was experiencing an MTM.

Finally, Tim had heard enough and spoke up.

“Hold on a minute,” he said, thrusting his hand into a stop position. “This is coming out of nowhere. I don’t know how you can see it that way,” Tim raised his voice defensively.

“Tim, I’m not saying that you didn’t work hard. But it’s not about hard work. It’s about results. And sometimes, it’s just doing the little things—like having 100 percent of your deliverables on time, every time,” Stella answered calmly.

“*I was on time for this meeting,*” Tim heard himself say before he could stop the words from spilling out of his mouth.

The meeting went downhill from there.

Later at his desk, Tim feared that he had just committed job suicide. And if that were the case, he doubted that Stella would give him a good reference to quietly change departments or find another job outside of the company.

Tim was caught off guard. He was prepared for praise, but instead he received criticism that he deemed unfair. As a result, Tim’s emotions turned hot and he raised his voice. Finally, he popped and said something he could not find a way to take back.

Why am I such an idiot? Tim asked himself, reflecting on his words and actions.

We Do Not Always Get It Right at Home

As Thanksgiving approached, Grace was filled with dread at the thought of hosting the family holiday dinner at her home. Grace loved family, but she did not like what happened when her brother-in-law Gary picked fights, which seemed to happen at every gathering.

Grace could not understand Gary’s lack of etiquette. Hadn’t he heard that polite people avoid the three taboo topics of money, religion, or politics? Instead of making those subjects off-limits, those were the only topics Gary seemed interested in discussing at length. And because the upcoming national election grew more heated and ugly as election day approached, she envisioned the dining room table as the platform for Gary to hold a rally, protest, and counter-protest all in one.

So, Grace wasn't surprised at Thanksgiving when the fireworks started right away. Gary's booming voice bellowed before his body ever cleared the front door.

"Who's driving that little wind-up toy with the Communist bumper stickers on it?" Gary asked.

Gary had fought with valor in the Vietnam War and recently retired as the lead technician at a large plumbing company.

Grace did not know it, but she, too, was experiencing an MTM.

Grace took a deep breath and muttered to her husband, Steve, "The fascist is here."

"Be kind, Grace," Steve soothed. "Gary was a war hero."

Popping his head into the kitchen, Gary asked loudly, "Please tell me you didn't make a gluten-free, dairy-free, sugar-free, vegan meal, did you?"

"I would have," Grace muttered under her breath, "If that would have made this holiday Gary-free."

The petty jabs and snide comments continued until the last guest left the home.

Lying in bed that night, Grace's mind replayed the day. *Why does this happen every time Gary and I get in the same room?* She asked in the darkness. By the end of dinner, Grace had felt physically exhausted, with her opinions unchanged and her feelings hurt. *Why does this keep happening? Is it me? Is it Gary?*

You Are Not Alone

Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman famously claimed that we each experience about 20,000 moments in a waking day, most lasting only a few seconds (Rath and Clifton 2020). We have all experienced moments at home and work when we knew immediately that we missed a chance to say things we wish we had. Or perhaps more troubling, we say things that later make us cringe.

These moments are typically wrapped into larger situations, ones where we knowingly repeat the same mistakes over and over again, unaware of other options available to us.

If you have had regrets, there is likely nothing wrong with your DNA or intelligence. Nor were your parents or society remiss for not teaching you manners and social skills. As evidence, the authors offer this simple question, “Don’t you Get It Right most of the time?” Of course, you do. It just does not *feel* that way.

Almost all of the memorable moments you can recall at the end of each day could be put in one of two buckets: positive or negative.

Of the two buckets, guess which ones you are most likely to recall? Psychologist Dr. Rick Hanson explains that our minds are “like Velcro for negative experiences, but Teflon for positive ones,” meaning that you will always find it easier to recall negative events—like the times you said the wrong things or thought of the right things too late—than positive events or the many times you *got it right*. The term for our human tendency to let negative events stick and positive events to get forgotten is called a *negativity bias* (Hanson 2016).

If you are like most people, your habits serve you well 90 percent of the time, but it is the 10 percent that keeps you awake at night. And, thanks to the wiring of your brain, you likely recall your failures much more readily than your victories.

Knowledge Is Not Enough

For more than four decades, we have led thousands of leaders and professionals interested in growth through the most cutting-edge, rigorous, accurate personality assessments ever created, teaching them how to better understand themselves and others. We have also shown leaders how they were perceived by others, giving them one-on-one coaching and feedback from their peers, direct reports, managers, and key stakeholders. In the classroom, we have shared the latest leadership research to maximize effective behaviors and minimize nonproductive ones.

Those attending our training sessions had several things in common. Most of them possessed:

- *Intelligence*. Think physicians, nurses, scientists, researchers, project managers, chief executive officers (CEOs), chief information officers (CIOs), chief human resource officers

(CHROs), leaders of federal agencies, and even a few actual rocket scientists. In tough financial times, the first thing most companies cut is employee training. But organizations always manage to fund learning for their top leaders and performers.

- *Solid understanding of their own personalities and preferences.* They also obtained a deep understanding of the impact of their actions and behaviors on those they led.
- *Great intentions.* They wanted to do the right thing for the business and by others.
- *A willingness and eagerness.* They wanted to put what they learned to immediate use.

Sadly, many of them had one more thing in common: once outside of the classroom, most got caught up in the speed and complexity of their respective roles and *reverted to their old ways of doing things!*

People can and do learn skills and acquire knowledge. They gain self-awareness about their strengths and weaknesses, styles, and preferences—to a point. People usually do not fail because they lack intelligence, time-on-job, knowledge of the right people, personality type, genetic makeup, communication style, problem-solving, delegation, coaching, or any other single element taught in a training class.

People fail when typical habits, reactions, behaviors, and thinking are not enough, and a situation calls for them to bring their best resources forward. When times are tough, many struggle to relate to others and adapt new thinking and actions to drive success.

Some Moments—and Relationships—Matter More Than Others

Remember Grace? She tossed and turned all night. Wanting to keep peace in the family and repair her relationship with Gary, she spent most of the night thinking about how she wished she had responded differently.

What Grace experienced in bed that night is called *esprit de l'escalier*, a uniquely French phrase (yet culturally universal phenomenon) meaning “that thing you wish you had said in the moment...*but didn't.*”

What Tim experienced after his performance review is expressed best by another French phrase known as a *faux pas*, “that thing you said and wished immediately you hadn’t.”

We have all experienced *esprit de l’escalier* and *faux pas* moments.

While not every moment requires you to show up with our best version of yourself, some do. Not every *faux pas* causes the same amount of damage as other mistakes. But, some create great harm. And, what you say and do in those moments might change the direction of your career or relationships with others moving forward.

What Do We Mean by Moments That Matter?

Building on Daniel Kahneman’s research about how people experience about 20,000 individual moments each day, Researcher Timothy D. Wilson of the University of Virginia claims that we have 11 million pieces of information entering our brains within any given moment (Wilson 2004). If we have 11 million pieces of information bombarding our 20,000 moments, each day, we are flooded with 220,000,000,000 pieces of data! While Wilson concludes that we can only be conscious (on our best days) of about 40 pieces of data in any given moment, that is still quite a lot of information to sift through.

The good news is, you do not have to act on those 220,000,000,000 bits of data, nor do the vast majority of those data points matter. And, of the 20,000 moments you experience each day, only a small portion of those really matter.

But some MTMs matter greatly to your well-being and success.

In fact, some moments have a profound impact. Think about those moments that make your heart race, leave your palms sweaty, and release butterflies into your stomach. Maybe you lie in bed at night anticipating these moments or rehashing them after they occur. You walk away playing the scenario over in your head, wondering if you got it right—or worse, fearing that you got it wrong. Maybe you said something you regretted—or did not say something and wish you had. MTMs can either be spontaneous, one-off situations or ongoing situations with a person or a group of people.

MTMs Have Three Traits

1. **Important, with an outcome that matters to your well-being or success.**

From Grace's perspective, her own political views were correct, and Gary's were wrong. She considered her opinions as facts and Gary's as just plain silly. As much as she reminded herself that she wanted to get along, she struggled with letting Gary spout lies as truths without at least trying to set the record straight! The outcome mattered, because it had the potential to create a divide—or unity—in the family. That outcome could potentially last for generations.

When it came to Tim's review, Stella might have blown it by focusing on the negatives upfront. But Tim did not control his emotions, something that would come back to haunt him. Tim viewed himself as successful, and he reviewed his year as one of great accomplishment. How could he just "let it go" and move forward?

2. **Complex, with no simple solution.**

Grace understood that were she to continue fighting with her brother-in-law, she would get what she has always gotten: more resentment and hard feelings. Were she to stop talking to Gary or refuse to attend any family function when Gary was present, she would miss out on many opportunities to enjoy the rest of her family. She saw no simple answer.

Tim found himself in a similar position. He entered his appraisal meeting with excitement but left with frustration and dread. Had he stayed silent, he would signal to Stella that he understood and agreed with her—neither of which was true. But, by responding the way he did, he sounded petty. He did not know how to Get It Right in his MTM, and he would not sleep well until he figured out what to do next.

3. **Relational, involving at least one other person.**

Grace loved her family, needed them in her life, desired a close relationship, and wanted to consider their needs. She would rather have crotchety Gary arguing in her home than a peaceful home

without him. She started thinking a better relationship with Gary might begin with herself. But how?

Tim's relationship with Stella was crucial too. Stella could discipline, promote, or sabotage Tim's ability for future success. Tim's success, by anyone's definition, was based on Stella's opinion. What could he do differently next time?

In MTMs, we choose how to initiate a conversation or respond to someone's behavior or words. We can create meaningful dialogue, lasting change, and substantial growth. Or, we can damage relationships and ensure future growth is stunted.

Consider a couple of your present (or recent) MTMs. In what situations do you historically struggle to Get It Right? Document a couple in Table 1.1 that repeat themselves or that you face today. Then, describe what makes them important, complex, and relational. Finally, write down your desired outcome.

Table 1.1 MTM breakdown

Describe MTM	How is it important?	How is it complex?	How is it relational?	Desired outcome

You may find it helpful to reference these MTMs as you read on, to help you develop strategies and apply tips to *Getting It Right When It Matters Most*.

Positive Psychology: The Study of What Works

Unlike traditional psychology that focuses on shrinking problems, positive psychology focuses on applying what works. If you want to know how to live a long life, study those who have made it to 100. What did they do differently? Can you learn from their habits?

As practitioners of positive psychology, we didn't write this book as a primer on how to Get It Wrong—but on how to Get It Right. We spotlight what to do differently to secure better outcomes.

Success is not just the absence of failure—but the presence of the right behaviors and mindset. We will share those best practices with you!

Do You Get It Right?

Read through the following situations and anticipate your natural, immediate reaction:

- You walk in on a work celebration for your newly promoted coworker who took *your* idea to your joint-boss and got promoted for it. *It matters.*
- Your boss presented you a great development opportunity to lead a strategic project completely outside of your area of experience, and you lack the internal relationships to succeed in it. *It matters.*
- As you enter your home, your spouse starts a conversation showing you that *clearly* you are about to have a heated, all-night argument. *It matters.*
- Your most important customer says your organization is not delivering enough and they are looking for a new vendor. *It matters.*
- You received a big promotion and you are now managing your former peers. *It matters.*
- Approaching the kitchen, you hear your teenaged son cursing at his mother as he gestures threateningly. *It matters.*
- Your new boss has an entirely new strategy for future success and you do not believe she sees you as part of the solution. *It matters.*
- Your success on a key project is dependent on successful collaboration with a coworker, who is not delivering their part. *It matters.*
- After being separated from your spouse for six months, your 10-year-old daughter gets called into the principal's office for being sent to school by your ex in a skirt that is too short.

While there, you discover that your ex also did not pack her a lunch or send lunch money. Last week, your ex failed to sign a field trip permission slip. As you are listed first on the school's call list, you are having to deal with this—again.

It matters.

- You scroll through social media and notice that someone you thought of as a close friend posted an article with what you consider incorrect information based on political biases. You could block or hide this person online, but you also have to work together on a community project. You stay up all night, scripting responses in your head. *It matters.*
- As protests erupt around a racially charged shooting, your coworker continues to make comments that make you feel uncomfortable. *It matters.*
- As a public health crisis emerges, you and your spouse differ in your approaches on how to keep your family safe.

It matters.

- After months working long hours on a difficult cross-divisional team project, a manager from another department goes to your boss, asking that you be replaced because “you’re difficult to work with.” *It matters.*
- You wake up on a Saturday morning to the sound of your new neighbor taking a chainsaw to your tree on the property line. (By the way, this situation happened to Scott.) *It matters.*

The *outcome of each of these examples is important*. Each is *complex*, offering no easy resolutions. And, each involves a *relationship with someone else*. These are MTMs. Thinking later about “what I should have said” will not help, and a faux pas on your part may well make matters worse. What do you do?

Skills for Finding Clarity in Ambiguity

We all come across important moments we are not prepared for, when we have no previous experience or classroom education to guide us.

Sometimes, this involves an *outside change or crisis* that rocks our current way of doing things. As this book was being finished, the authors

experienced the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, which changed daily routines and challenged nearly everyone. Routine changes can include a new information technology (IT) system, regulatory mandates, or mergers.

Sometimes, the ambiguity comes from a *relationship or personal situation* we do not know how to navigate—such as a new boss, political conflict with someone at work, or a family member doing something we wish they would stop.

You undoubtedly experience times when—

- You have no clear answer about what to say or do
- You feel threatened and afraid of doing the wrong thing
- You have already said the wrong thing and face a damaged relationship
- The relationship seems impossible to maintain or repair
- Your emotions are hijacked, making you more likely to act in a way that will sabotage your results
- You know the results you want but do not see any good options

We often run head-on or, even worse, are blindsided by these situations. What can you do instead? How can you rise above and not be a slave to the moment? If you struggle during these MTMs or do not feel equipped to navigate the stormy seas, then this book is for you.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” These are the critical times in your career and life. These are the times when it matters how you show up. These are the moments that define your career, and more importantly, your life.

Entering the SOAR Cycle

Our successes or setbacks are directly tied to how we show up when engaging with our MTMs. These moments have a rhythm and flow—meaning they do not need to occur chaotically, if you recognize and plan for them.



Figure 1.1 The SOAR cycle

We have organized the four phases of that rhythm to include: Self, Outlook, Action, and Reflection (we will use the acronym SOAR). We will touch on each of them briefly here and then in much more detail throughout this book.

For better or worse, you bring Self to every *MTM* you encounter, which creates a need for an intentional Outlook that allows you to choose one or a set of Actions—that lead to either positive, negative, or neutral Reflection. That is the cycle.

In fact, SOAR is a cycle that you go through hundreds of times each day without giving it much thought, and rightfully so as you would not ever get anything done if you always needed to slow down before taking action.

Let us explore a very simple example, which may require a stretch to meet the litmus test of being important to our success, but it does involve a *relationship* and *situation that could be deemed as complex* (depending on the family dynamic and history).

Let us say your 16-year-old son asks you if he can go play video games with his friend down the block.

- Your Self (what you bring to the table) has been presented an MTM that you may not even recognize.
- You can either say “yes” or “no,” depending on your Outlook (lens for seeing this situation).
- You choose the Action to say “no.”
- But you are not done. You then enter a Reflection stage when your son says a few nasty words, stomps upstairs, and slams his door. And then, you spend the next several hours wondering if you made the right decision.

This is a simple example of how we continually go through the SOAR cycle and do not need to give much additional thought to the how, what, and why we did it this way. This is a common and straightforward situation.

Or is it? Let us add some complexity that can turn this almost non-event into something bigger:

- Maybe your son has struggled to make new friends since your family moved into the area nine months ago. So you considered saying “yes.”
- Maybe you have hours of work ahead of you, so you considered saying “yes” just to have a quiet home.
- Maybe your son, who regularly makes C grades, has worked very hard since the beginning of the school year, so you wanted to say “yes” to reward him.
- Maybe you have been closely following the strong recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to practice social distancing until the COVID-19 crisis passes its peak. So you know you have to say “no.”

The MTM might happen before you walk in the door. You show up tired and hungry. You had a bad day. Or, on the flip side, you just got a promotion. You got great sleep the night before and you are looking forward to a weekend with as few kids as possible around!

We will explore more about this cycle and your MTMs throughout this book. But it is easy to see how even simple situations can have complex components—and become opportunities to Get It Right.

The Journey Begins

In the following chapters, we provide the knowledge and tools to effectively manage Self, bring awareness and clarity to your opportunities through your Outlook, create insights for the best Actions, and understand and learn from your results through Reflection.

Through it all, you will be taught the skills that make a difference in your MTMs—skills that help you SOAR instead of sink.

And here is how we are going to do it. Have you ever wondered how first responders (police, nurses, doctors, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), firemen, etc.) act with such skill during moments of life and death? First, they do not learn new skills in the middle of a real life and death crisis. You would not drop a new firefighter into the middle of a wildfire and expect a good, safe outcome for the firefighter, her colleagues, or the public. Rather, first responders are taught small, precise skills in a safe environment away from the chaos of an actual crisis until they can act without thinking, instead depending on muscle memory and habit.

Second, successful first responders learn to slow down chaotic, dangerous situations. Researchers refer to this “slowing down of time” as *time dilation*. Cognitive neuroscientists have found that baseball players at bat, for example, describe that time slows down and visual information increases when they face a fastball at home plate—allowing them to hit a ball that most eyes are not trained to track!

First responders who are properly trained and operating according to the oaths they took do the same thing, slowing down time to understand, assess, and act with precision in the face of life-threatening situations. (Those who do not slow down time to respond instead of react may make dangerous or deadly decisions.)

Similarly, in the chapters that follow, we will slow down each phase of the SOAR cycle to teach you how to best navigate your MTMs in a “safe environment.” You will learn self-leadership tools to apply in real time and understand how to avoid common traps that prevent you from Getting It Right.

Getting It Right When It Matters Most

Self-Leadership for Work & Life

Tony Gambill & Scott Carbonara

“I love when authors create simple solutions for our complicated world, and that’s exactly what Tony and Scott have done. This book jumps into the middle of the complex situations we all face every day and provides a clear path forward. There’s deep, practical wisdom in the SOAR approach.”—**Jon Acuff, New York Times bestselling author of Soundtracks, The Surprising Solution to Overthinking**

Discover how to *Get It Right* in your *Moments That Matter*—when the situation is complex and relational—and the stakes are high. Transform the outcome of your most challenging situations and interactions when you feel—

- **Threatened** by charged emotions or uncertainty
- **Paralyzed** by fear of saying (or doing) the wrong thing (again)
- **Defeated** by a relationship that seems damaged beyond repair
- **Perplexed** about how to achieve the results you desire
- **Stalled** in progress with others due to differing styles and perspective

In an ever-changing environment when typical habits, behaviors, and thinking aren’t enough, *Getting It Right When It Matters Most* introduces research-backed insight and a simple model for your most important situations. Apply self-awareness, learning agility, and emotional intelligence through the Self, Outlook, Action, and Reflection (SOAR) cycle.

Tony Gambill brings more than 20 years of executive experience delivering impactful leadership and talent solutions for global organizations. Tony is a contributor for *Forbes* where he writes on the topics of leadership and talent development. He is the president of Clearview Leadership which provides innovative leadership and talent development consulting services. Learn more at www.clearviewleaders.com.

Scott Carbonara is an award-winning global keynote speaker, author, and leadership consultant who is passionate about engaging a company’s greatest asset: its people. As CEO of Spiritus Communications, Scott is known as “The Leadership Therapist” for his diverse background—from serving as a crisis counselor to executive chief-of-staff of a multi-billion-dollar company.

Business Career Development Collection

Vilma Barr, Editor

